

WHAT AMERICA IS TALKING ABOUT
HELEN KELLER TODAY

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WHAT
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V. 51 No. 3

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HELEN KELLER TODAY

IN ONE of our military hospitals, a wounded boy who had been through the terrible days of the Salerno and Anzio battles looked at a woman who stood at his bedside and in blunt soldier language said, "My God, it took courage to do what you've done!"

The woman was Helen Keller.

Helen Keller, at the age of sixty-four, is still carrying on the work to which she has dedicated her life—doing good. Helen Keller, the blind and deaf and speechless woman who taught the world that the impossible was possible by learning to talk, who brought home the lesson of the invincibility of the human spirit as few others have ever done, is devoting much of her time to visiting the Army and Navy hospitals and bringing comfort to

the patients. Wherever Helen Keller goes, she carries her message of a better world based on tolerance and understanding, on the belief in human brotherhood. Her message is always inspiring, and doubly inspiring to a soldier who has fought for his country and has been made a casualty in the fight; but her presence is also a potent tonic, often more potent than medicines and the wisdom of doctors. For when a man on a hospital bed sees what handicaps this woman has overcome, he finds more strength to win the victory over his own injuries.

The story of the career of this extraordinary woman is almost as familiar as a folk-tale. She was born in Alabama, and up to the age of nineteen months was a normal child, even physically precocious in some respects. At six months she could already repeat some words; she

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tried to imitate everything she saw, and one day, when she was a year old, she suddenly walked clear across a large bathroom to reach some dancing shadows on the floor. She was very pretty and lively.

At nineteen months she became ill of what the doctors called congestion of the stomach and brain. The disease almost took her life, but when she recovered, her health was completely restored—except that she had lost her sight, speech and hearing. Her childhood, after this, was tempestuous. With her quick mind she tried to express herself, and being unable to find any means of communication except touching and pulling, she burst into wild fits of anger and willfulness. She had been plunged into darkness and silence too young to remember anything of the world, but she had great vitality and imagination, and instinctively she fought her imprisonment.

■ WHEN SHE was seven, her parents engaged Anne Mansfield Sullivan (later Mrs. Macy) to undertake the extremely difficult task of teaching her to read by touch and to understand the finger language. This was in the days when the science of teaching the blind and the deaf-mute was in its pioneer stage, and the unbelievable patience, the great tenderness and sympathy, and the remarkable resourcefulness of Anne Sullivan aroused wonder and admiration throughout the world. With this teacher at her side, Helen Keller became reborn. Peace came into her life. She learned to read and to write, mastered the finger vocabulary, and finally accomplished the miracle of learning to talk.

The courage and perseverance that went into this undertaking has become one of the epics of our age. Helen Keller had to learn to speak mechanically. Her vocal chords, like those of most deaf-mutes, were not impaired, but she could not speak, simply because she could not hear speech. Learning to speak is a matter of imitation. The child hears others speak and imitates the sounds. Some deaf-mutes have learned to speak through seeing the movements of the teacher's lips. But Helen Keller was deprived of that advantage. She had to acquire speech through placing her fingers on her teacher's lips, throat, tongue and face, thus catching in her fingertips lip movements, vibrations and facial expressions and attempting to reproduce these into sounds of speech she could never hear.

It was an appallingly difficult feat. It required endless practice. It required a staunchness of will almost impossible for the average person to conceive. But Helen Keller found the will, and her courage never weakened. And so she, a blind deaf-mute, learned to speak.

In possession of the faculties of near-normal communication, Helen Keller went on to obtain education, and familiarized herself with the problems of people—the blind and the seeing. She found in herself a fine and poetic talent for writing and lecturing, and with greatness in her heart as well as in her spirit, she became one of the foremost teachers and leaders of our time. She taught service to humanity, and sought to lead humanity into a better life. She traveled



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WAXED PAPER



WHAT America is Talking About

(Continued from page 15) all over the world, spreading her doctrine of service and brotherhood, and whenever a good cause called her, she answered.

This humane activity she has continued to this day.

■ **HELEN KELLER**, at sixty-four, looks younger than her age. Her face is vivacious, her sightless eyes are actually expressive. She is eager to take part in conversation, and words literally pour from her lips. She conducts conversations with the help of her closest friend and companion, Polly Thomson, who took the place of Mrs. Macy when she died. Miss Thomson taps the words others speak into Miss Keller's hand, and Miss Keller speaks her replies. Hearing Helen Keller talk for the first time, it is difficult to understand her. She gives the impression of speaking a strange tongue. But after some familiarity, the meanings of a few words emerge, and it is quite a thrill to begin recognizing phrases. In time it becomes possible to understand everything she says.

When Miss Keller talks to strangers, Miss Thomson repeats the words as she utters them, so they may be readily understood. Usually before Miss Thomson has finished tapping the sentences, Miss Keller has already grasped the entire meaning of what has been said and is rapidly responding.

Helen Keller today finds the time too short for all that she wants to do. Aside from her war work and her devotion to all human welfare, she travels throughout the country as the special ambassador of the blind, ever trying to make their life easier, more normal. She lectures and writes and carries on a vast correspondence with individuals—particularly those with afflictions—and institutions seeking her advice.

She is Counselor of the American Foundation for the Blind, of which she was the chief founder. After she had come out of her shut-in existence, and found "hearing" and speech and education and normal association with her fellow-beings, her great dream was to establish a national organization to serve the needs of the blind. Accompanied by Mrs. Macy, she went on a lecture tour and raised a large sum of money. With this fund the Foundation was started.

It has done wonderful work. With Miss Keller as the inspiration, it turned itself into a powerful instrument for the benefit of those who live in darkness. Through it, a law was passed which directed that, whenever possible, govern-

ment departments buy products made by the blind. Immediately thereafter, the Foundation set up National Industries for the Blind to facilitate the placing of these government orders. Today there are over 2500 blind persons engaged in war work in "sheltered" workshops, as they are called.

One of the most spectacular achievements of the Foundation was the production of "Talking Books," or recordings of literary works. Previously, books published in Braille—read by passing fingers over raised dots—were the only books available to the blind. But less than twenty per cent of the blind could read Braille proficiently, and so the great majority were barred from the happiness to be found in books. The Foundation developed records playing 15 to 20 minutes each side, and phonographs for their use. On these records are now transcribed the finest of the classics and modern books, including best-sellers. The work is carried on under a grant from Congress (made through the efforts of the Foundation) to the Library of Congress, which loans and mails the records to any adult blind person without charge. The phonographs are loaned through local organizations for the blind. The records are available through the 27 regional lending libraries throughout the country, and to those blind people who can afford to buy the equipment and the records they are sold at cost.

The Talking Books are made in the Foundation's own studios in New York. Many famous actors read books for the records. Some of the recordings have "sound effects" and musical accompaniment, much in the same way as radio plays. The most notable book produced is the Bible, recorded on 169 records. To hear the beautiful phrases of the Scriptures spoken by a voice which lovingly gives the perfect value to each word is a revelation. No one who is privileged to hear this extraordinary recording can fail to feel a surge of inspiration.

■ **TO THE** credit of the Foundation, too, goes the concession obtained from all railroads and buses to permit a blind person and a companion to travel for the price of one ticket; and it is the Foundation that has been responsible for an improved Braille typewriter and other machines, and a Braille watch, all of which are supplied to the blind either at cost or without charge.

It is a splendid structure that Helen Keller has helped to build up for the strengthening of the blind.

The war has given Helen Keller a new

incentive to bring about that enlightenment in the world which can secure permanent peace and a better life for all. In talking to a representative of TRUE STORY Magazine, she was asked what the American women could do to create those ideal conditions. The question was tapped into Miss Keller's left hand by Miss Thomson. As usual, before it was quite finished, the words sprang from Miss Keller's lips:

"We must try to understand the conditions under which we live and the sinister causes which produced this war. Women—every one of us women—can unite in demanding that these causes be removed, that steps be taken in the post-war world to remove hatred, fear and suspicion and establish a democracy based on equality and mutual respect—and this shall be the true brotherhood of man. As Lincoln said, a house divided against itself must fall. So, too, a disunited world, tied up in endless feuds, will cost the very life of civilization."

Miss Keller was asked what her profound experiences had taught her were the best rules for human guidance, and she replied—again before the final phrase of the question had been translated into her hand:

"No rule can ever be better than the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule embraces all human love.

"If a subsidiary rule can be given, it is the rule of applying the lessons obtained from human experience. We learn in many ways, through suffering, through personal experience, through a wider understanding of other people's problems. This knowledge can help solve our own difficulties.

"And if we can learn from the war, as from the experiences of our neighbors, we can help our and future generations. Yes, and I am convinced that this time we shall learn the lessons from war. Let us prophesy it now—people will learn from this war that selfishness is the great crime, and co-operation and neighborliness is the great movement by which mankind shall better itself."

These are comforting and hopeful words. In Helen Keller's dark world, there burns a torch of truth and inspiration. It enables her sightless eyes to see far.

FIRST AMERICANS

The children of the Uintah Indian School at Whiterocks, Utah, heard their teacher say it was too bad that the requests from the government to collect milkweed pods came at this time of the year. It was now the end of fall, and the milkweed was cracked open and shattering badly.

"Why does the government need the milkweed?" one child asked. "Isn't it just a weed?"

The teacher explained that while it was true the milkweed had been considered a nuisance by farmers, the war had made it very valuable. The floss from the pods was used to stuff life jackets and life preservers for the men in the Navy and merchant marine. Formerly kapok was used, a substance imported mainly from Java. The war had cut off our supplies of kapok, and the ingenuity of American agricultural (Continued on page 156)



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DOROTHEA LYNDE DIX



IN EVERY human being, whatever his position in life, the state of his morals or true level of his intelligence, Dorothea Lynde Dix saw "the spark of God." To a woman with this priceless insight, a desire to fan that spark into a steady, sustaining light, came as a matter of course.

Her way was not clear at first. Born in Maine in 1802, of deeply religious but impoverished parents, she was faced with the task, at nineteen, of supporting her younger brothers. She opened a school in Boston for children of the rich. Late afternoons, in the barn loft, she gave the same lessons free, to children of the poor.

At thirty-nine, and suffering with tuberculosis, she took a trip to England for her health, after which the road was revealed. She had found those who needed her most, those in whom "the spark of God" seemed to burn very low—the mentally deranged. Refusing to be deterred by her own ill health, she made a tour of American jails and almshouses where, at that time, the insane were kept. Conditions were deplorable, appalling. Violent lunatics housed with the sane who had run afoul of the law. Half-witted and subnormal girls thrown in with hardened women criminals, and with those whose only crime was pauperism.

After two years of investigation, Miss Dix delivered a report to the Massachusetts legislature. Everybody was horrified. To the credit of the legislature, that body instantly voted funds for the

proper housing and care of mental cases. Thus encouraged, Miss Dix spent nine years investigating conditions in other states. Altogether, she visited every state east of the Rockies, and always appropriations were made and she was consulted on plans for the buildings and the training of attendants. Always, too, paupers and prisoners received a good share of attention.

She was sensitive and refined, yet she went into the most miserable and filthy of places. She looked like the typical lady reformer of her time, austere face, straight nose, hair stiffly parted in the center, firm mouth, yet the thousands of unfortunates she visited, knew her for her generous smile, her warm, compassionate eyes.

Sweeping aside all obstacles, Dorothea Lynde Dix founded thirty-two asylums, not only in America, but in Europe. She had the lunacy laws changed in Scotland. She went as far as Constantinople in Turkey, St. Petersburg in Russia. Wherever she stopped, she preached the gospel that the insane and mentally defective are human beings, too, and must be ministered to; that paupers need a chance to earn their own living; that prisoners are not forever condemned in the sight of God.

As with many sick women, she was kept alive into her eighties, by the urgency of her work. The monument to her memory is more enduring than bronze or granite, the gratitude of countless and nameless souls in whom "the spark of God" was cherished.

**WOMEN
WHO SERVED
AMERICA**

THE EDITOR

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HELEN KELLER TODAY.

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